

# Behind the riots:

## Findings of a survey into children's and adults' views of the 2011 English riots

### Introduction

In August 2011, for five days cities and towns across England were mired in the worst public disturbances seen in this country since the 1980s. What started with a police shooting and a peaceful protest in North London, spread across the city, and other mainly urban areas, and ended up involving around 14,000 rioters<sup>1</sup>. The disturbances took place against a back drop of international economic instability, rising unemployment, cuts to local authority services and reductions in financial welfare support.

Prominent public discourse has defined the riots as a 'youth issue'. While young people should not be seen as solely to blame for the disturbances, Ministry of Justice data on those brought before the courts for offences relating to the riots, revealed that a quarter (26%) were aged between 10 and 17 years old with nearly half (48%) aged between 18 and 24.

The Children's Society believes it is important for children themselves to have a chance to share their views on the events. We are a leading national charity that supports nearly 50,000 children and young people every year through specialist services. Giving a voice to children and young people to influence policy and public debate is at the heart of our mission. So we conducted a survey with a nationally representative sample of 13 to 17 year olds, as we believe it is vital that children and young people have their voices heard in this important debate. Their views are also compared with a representative sample of adults providing the first statistically robust cross-generational report on public perceptions of the causes and possible consequences of the riots.



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<sup>1</sup> Estimate from The Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2011) *5 Days in August: An interim report on the 2011 English riots*

## **Methodology**

The Children's Society commissioned an online survey of a representative sample of children aged 13-17 and adults aged 18+ from across the UK, to understand their views of the riots that took place in England in August 2011. In total, 1004 adults and 1077 13-17 year olds were surveyed between 3 October and 10 November 2011.

The questions were devised following a consultation with children where they were asked to give their reasons why they thought children had become involved in the riots.<sup>2</sup>

The survey covered the following areas:

- Perceived reasons why some young people became involved in the riots
- Whether the government should be doing more to support children and young people since the riots

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<sup>2</sup> A consultation event was held at the Greenbelt youth festival at the end of August 2011 with a group of children and young people.

- Whether adults will view children and young people more negatively because of the riots
- Whether children and young people felt their immediate future had been affected by the riots.

Four online focus groups with children<sup>3</sup> and a face-to-face group interview with children in Manchester were also conducted to provide more in-depth discussions with young people about the causes and consequences of the riots. All the quotes included in the report are from these consultations.

The report also compares our findings with other recent reports including the Riots Communities and Victims Panel Interim Report<sup>4</sup>; the British Youth Council<sup>5</sup> (BYC) online survey of young people who were mainly young community leaders; and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) study<sup>6</sup> into the motivations of young people involved in or affected by the riots.

## **The Survey Findings**

### ***Q1: What do you think were the reasons why some young people became involved in the recent riots?***

Adults and children aged 13-17 were provided with a list of possible responses. Table 1 lists the reasons provided and the percentage of adults and children that chose each reason. They were able to choose more than one reason.

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<sup>3</sup> The four separate online focus groups were carried out with: white young people from a area not affected by the riots; white young people living in an urban areas that had riots; a mixed black and minority ethnic (BME) and white group from an urban and suburban area that did not have riots; and young people from BME backgrounds that lived in an area that did not experience rioting.

<sup>4</sup> The Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2011) *5 Days in August: An interim report on the 2011 English riots*

<sup>5</sup> British Youth Council (2011) *Our Streets: The views of young people and young leaders on the riots in England in August 2011*

<sup>6</sup> National Centre for Social Research (2011) *The August Riots in England: Understanding the involvement of young people*

Overall, the views of the adults and children surveyed were strikingly similar. The main difference in adults' and children's views was that whilst 63% of adults agreed that people got involved in the riots 'just for fun', only 49% of children agreed this was the case. A greater proportion (71%) of younger adults, in the 18 – 24 age group, agreed with this reason<sup>7</sup>.

Most adults and children agreed on four key reasons why some young people became involved in the riots:

- To get goods and possessions they couldn't afford to buy
- Just for fun
- They felt pressure to join in from others taking part
- Boredom, as not enough things for young people to do.

Few adults and children said that 'to get their voices heard' or 'as reaction to Government cuts' were important reasons.

The most prevalent answer given by both adults and children was that some young people became involved in the riots to get goods and possessions they could not afford to buy. This is similar to the findings of the Reading the Riots<sup>8</sup> study that interviewed 270 of those who took part in the riots. The study found that many rioters saw the breakdown of order as an opportunity to acquire goods and luxury items they could not afford in normal circumstances. This reason was also commonly raised in the focus groups we conducted. One young person from an area that experienced riots stated:

*"People just wanted things for free, it was an opportunity".*

Responses from the focus groups suggested that not being able to afford these possessions was key, raising issues of poverty and youth unemployment. One young person said:

*"If you had trouble feeding your family, you would also consider stealing and taking advantage of the moment"*

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<sup>7</sup> Where findings of the research are compared by sub-group within the commentary, results are statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

<sup>8</sup> London School of Economics, The Guardian, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Open Society (2011) *Reading the Riots*

This also links to the conclusions of the interim report by the Riots Communities and Victims Panel<sup>9</sup> that found some rioters felt they had no hope for the future and therefore nothing to lose.

While government cuts were not commonly stated as a reason for the riots, the survey found that many 17 year olds did think rioters were reacting to government cuts, with more than quarter (29%) citing that reason. This antipathy towards government cuts and the need to have children and young people's opinions valued was also raised in the focus groups, with one young person stating: "*Young people aren't being prioritised...the government needs to listen.*"

***Q2: What do you think was the main reason why some young people became involved in the recent riots?***

Respondents were also asked to choose one main reason why some children and young people became involved in the riots. In both groups, just over a third said the main reason was to get goods and possessions they could not afford to buy.

Just under one in five (19%) of children in our survey said the main reason was just for fun with slightly more adults – just under a quarter (23%) – identifying it as the main reason.

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<sup>9</sup> The Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2011) *5 Days in August: An interim report on the 2011 English riots*

Nearly one in five of both children and adults said pressure to join in from others taking part was the main reason. Very few identified either reacting to government cuts or to get noticed as the main reason.

***Q3: Should the government be doing more to support young people since the riots?***

Respondents were asked whether they felt the government should be doing more to support young people since the riots. As shown in Table 3, more than half of adults (51%) and children (56%) said that the government should be providing more support.

Of those who disagreed, it is significant that far more adults (25%) than children (15%) said the government should *not* be doing more.

It is also notable that those in the transition to adulthood stage said that more government support is needed – two thirds (67%) of 17 year olds and six out of ten (60%) of young adults aged 18-24. This mirrors the response of young people in the focus groups, with many participants saying that more activities and support are needed to "occupy young people with something constructive".

***Q4: Do you feel that adults will look at young people more negatively because of the recent riots?***

The majority of adults and children felt that adults will look at young people more negatively because of the riots. Approximately one in five felt that all or most adults will react in this way, and over two-thirds said at least some will view young people more negatively. Less than one in ten adults and children said that adults will not view young people more negatively because of the riots.

In particular, young adults were more likely to say that all or most adults will look at young people more negatively, with 31% of 17 year olds and 34% of the 18-24 age group agreeing with this statement. This was also raised as a concern in the focus groups with participants stating that:

*"Young people (are) not getting respected"*

*"The general public (are) not liking us".*

***Q5: How do you think your immediate future has been affected by the recent riots?***

In the immediate aftermath of the riots, concerns were raised by children and young people, and by voluntary sector organisations working with them, that the events would impact negatively on their future prospects. Most of the children we surveyed (56%) did not feel that the riots had impacted negatively on their futures. However, one in seven did, showing there is still a clear perception among young people that the riots have affected them, regardless of the fact they did not take part.



## **Conclusion and key messages**

There was clear agreement amongst both adults and children that the main reason for young people taking part was to gain material items that they cannot ordinarily afford to buy. This correlates strongly with the recent 'Reading the Riots' study and the Guardian ICM poll with adults, which found that poverty was thought to be a key factor in the riots. It indicates that material well-being cannot be overlooked as a significant issue affecting young people today. Research published earlier this year by The Children's Society showed a strong link between a child's material deprivation and their overall subjective well-being or life satisfaction<sup>10</sup>. Clearly, tackling poverty and material disadvantage is crucial to avoid further unrest among children and young people.

There was also cross-generational agreement that the government should be providing more support to young people in the wake of the riots. The issue of youth support is becoming ever more important in the face of predicted rises in child poverty and record levels of young people not in education, training or employment. Crucially, the call for support was highest among 17 year olds, who also most strongly felt that government cuts played a part and that their immediate future had been affected. It is this group who are facing great uncertainty in the wake of cuts to youth services, the education maintenance allowance, and who will be affected by rising youth unemployment levels.

Above all, children and young people feel they will be perceived more negatively by adults. It is vital that this is addressed as a matter of priority – children and young people often face a huge challenge in dealing with negative public perceptions. Everyone has a part to play in addressing this: from government, local authorities and the media through to the voluntary sector and community organisations. The Children's Society runs projects that provide opportunities for children and adults to come together to break down negative perceptions and suspicions across generational

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<sup>10</sup> Missing out: A child-centred analysis of material deprivation and subjective well-being, <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/well-being/missing-out>

divides. We believe this inter generational work is vital in challenging negative stereotypes.

Overall, The Children's Society believes that it is essential for children and young people to be valued by, and active participants in, their communities and wider society. Our research on children's subjective well being demonstrates that by viewing children as active participants rather than passive recipients of decisions made by adults their life satisfaction and personal happiness is enhanced. Ultimately, that is why the views expressed in this report need to be taken seriously by all those working in this area to ensure that the lessons are learned from the events of August 2011.